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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKISH MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS: ...AND THE MAYOR OF
TURKEY IS TAYYIP ERDOGAN

REF: A. ANKARA 1436

[B](#). ANKARA 1833

[C](#). ANKARA 1834

[D](#). ANKARA 1835

[E](#). ANKARA 0348

[F](#). 02 ANKARA 7683

(U) Classified by Polcouns John Kunstadter; reasons: E.O.
12958 1.5 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: We expect ruling AK Party (AKP) to win big in Turkey's March 28 mayoral and municipal council elections. However, victory will weigh heavily on the course of Tayyip Erdogan's AK Party (AKP) government and on his and his party's ability (1) to manage popular, pent-up expectations, both for economic improvement and on social issues such as the headscarf; (2) to improve decision-making on domestic policies and political balances, and by extension foreign policy; and (3) to maintain at a minimum correct relations with core elements of the Turkish State which remain most wary of AKP: the Turkish military, judiciary, and presidency. End summary.

[1](#)2. (U) This cable lays out conclusions from our pre-election trips to 15 provinces from Istanbul and the west through the central Anatolian heartland to the Black Sea and Southeast, as well as from consultations with other close contacts in eastern and southeastern Turkey. Septels provide first-hand impressions and local color.

Predicted Results

[1](#)3. (U) It is misleading to focus on the nationwide percentages when analyzing the results from more than 3200 municipalities of widely varying sizes and types. However, since both AKP and its opponents will (mis)use the figures as a proxy for AKP's strength, we include the figures. National polls have generally put AKP in the 45%-55% range (ref A), with some apparent manipulation: establishmentarian Tarhan Erdem's recent poll showing AKP taking Istanbul and Ankara by wide margins is seen by our AKP contacts as an attempt to scare anti-AKP voters into voting for main opposition left-of-center CHP; the forecast of only 45% for AKP in a poll released May 26 by AKP-linked ANAR appears to be an attempt to still Kemalist fears of an overwhelming AKP result. Judging by what AKP officials have hinted to us in Ankara and the field (supported by our own first-hand observations), AKP expects somewhere between 50%-52% nationally, which might translate into 60%-70% of municipalities.

[1](#)4. (C) There is speculation in the national press that Erdogan and his top leadership, wishing to stay slightly under 50% so as not to provoke greater opposition within the Turkish State, aim to provoke voters on the left to coalesce around CHP, thereby preserving a formal opposition. However, trying to manage the AKP vote downward, while not impossible, would be extraordinarily hard to keep secret. Moreover, Erdogan has continued to expend unusual personal and party energy in countrywide campaigning, including right up to the end to take Gaziantep from 15-year mayor and CHP icon Celal Dogan. From its side, CHP is lifeless in virtually all its campaigns outside selected districts of Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. Perhaps the pollsters and Ankara pundits (e.g., leading sociologist Sencer Ayata) who now foresee CHP rallying from 12% to 18%-22% have a correct sense of momentum. However, from our on-the-ground observations we find it difficult to see CHP matching its 19% vote total in the Nov. 2002 general elections.

[1](#)5. (C) CHP incumbents with good track records and common-touch personalities such as Gaziantep's Celal Dogan have a solid chance of retaining their seats when facing colorless AKP candidates (see below). The same applies for energetic incumbents from now-shriveled parties such as center-right ANAP (e.g., Manisa, Karadeniz Eregli),

left-of-center DSP (e.g., Eskisehir), and rightist-nationalist MHP in smaller cities (e.g., Mengen, Beypazari). Mainly Kurdish left-of-center DEHAP looks set to retain at least some municipalities in the southeast. But overall AKP is on a roll. Its momentum is broad -- if lacking the excitement in the period leading up to the Nov. 2002 general elections -- because, while it remains a conglomerate rather than a coherent party, AKP is having an impact selling itself as Erdogan, emphasizing its commitment to service, and drawing on a campaign organization far, far superior to that of any other civilian entity in Turkey.

The nature of AKP and its campaign

16. (C) AKP's grassroots party structure is a cross between a communist party (without the same party-line discipline or total propaganda machine) and Cuban block warden system. Developed by Erdogan in his rise to the mayoralty of greater Istanbul, it relies on a system of provincial and sub-provincial chairmen and governing boards overseeing women's and youth auxiliaries, neighborhood wardens, and precinct groups including one rep each from the women's and youth auxiliaries and two more senior party activists. Extensive computerization of voting stats permits almost man-to-man marking of voters.

17. (C) As laid out in refs B-D and observed by us in Istanbul, Ankara, Afyon, and Gaziantep as well, AKP's women's auxiliaries are full of energetic, enterprising women willing to put in long hours as volunteer organizers, door-to-door campaigners or block wardens. Yet four factors combine to keep women in the background: (1) retrograde attitudes on the part of AKP's men; (2) women's abiding sense of responsibility to put their duties as wives and mothers first (repeated to us in meetings with auxiliaries across the country); (3) women's diffidence and lack of access to finances (as noted by leading independent women's activist Selma Acuner); and (4) rivalries among women (as stated bluntly by AKP Istanbul M.P. Nimet Cubukcu). In this context, the exhortations of Tayyip Erdogan and his wife Emine to find more women candidates rang exceptionally hollow during the campaign.

18. (C) AKP insiders as diverse as deputy party chairman for policy Dengir Firat, iconoclast conservative Ankara M.P. Ersonmez Yarbay, Istanbul Alibeykoy's veteran activists Erhan Senol and Suat Sar, and Gaziantep's Nizip district party board member Salih Uygur readily admit that, despite AKP's formidable grassroots campaign organization, it will take years to mold the current formation into a coherent, internally democratic party with a variety of compelling personalities. Instead, just as at the national level, at the municipal level AKP is trading on Erdogan as the party rather than on the identity and capabilities of its candidates. Even Ankara greater municipality candidate Melih Gokcek, a character in his own right and a latecomer to AKP, pays obsequious homage to Erdogan in one of his campaign posters. In our pre-election travels beyond Ankara we have almost invariably come across faceless, colorless AKP candidates in thrall to the provincial party machines, which remain dominated by veterans of Islamism-colored Milli Gorus.

Ghosts of Islamism Past

19. (C) We see a difference in focus between Erdogan and the leadership of AKP's 81 provincial party organizations. A ruthless pragmatist, Erdogan has moved beyond the secret lodge (cemaatcilik) approach he grew up with under Milli Gorus leader Necmettin Erbakan. Erdogan is attempting to mold a "conservative democratic" party embodied in himself, modeled after something between the CDU and CSU in Germany, and reflective of Islamic values, but not -- for now -- Islamist. His solution for controlling the holdover Milli Gorus types in AKP was to forbid provincial or district party bosses from running as mayoral candidates. However, he allowed them substantial say in selection of mayoral candidates.

110. (C) Thus to a great extent AKP's provincial party organizations remain dominated by people who in their party work continue to reflect a Milli Gorus (MG) approach -- and who with their special handshakes, just-so cut of mustache, and well-scrubbed, pale, soft faces look the part -- even as they claim to have changed.

111. (C) Founded by Erbakan more than 30 years ago, fed by

Saudi and, at least previously by Iranian, money, and continuing to be financed to a great extent by its membership in western Europe (principally Germany and Belgium), MG is a classic example of Turkish secret-lodge duality. On the one hand, MG poses as the true path to an Islamic world. Its rhetoric is full of nostalgic references to the Caliphate and supposed tolerance of the Ottoman Empire, droning appeals to Muslim piety, and the dream of the ummet (the extended brotherhood of Muslims) in place of the Kemalist Republic. It bathes in paranoia and anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Alevi (heterodox Muslims), conspiracy-laden cliches. It revels in anti-Zionism (at the same time conveniently forgetting that, as Prime Minister in 1996-97, Erbakan approved military cooperation agreements with Israel). It treats women imperiously. Teacher (Hoca) Erbakan is treated as the infallible leader of the brotherhood and his authoritarianism is accepted as righteous.

12. (C) On the other hand, what really drive MG are sheer material interests, profit-making commercial or political deals for the boys, appreciation of Oriental cunning, and utter opportunism. The archetype of hypocrisy, MG and its actions are far from spiritual, far from the ascetic, Sharia norms its rhetoric suggests.

13. (C) What has frustrated forward-looking AKPers is the grip the MG types continue to have on provincial party matters at the expense of the candidates. Sule Kilicarslan, a dynamic and ambitious younger woman in the AKP Istanbul provincial organization, recently expressed to us her sharp dismay at having been denied the AKP Bahcekoy mayoral candidacy in Istanbul by the MG network, which chose a central-casting MG type instead. In response to our comment that as many as 20 of the 72 AKP mayoral candidates in greater Istanbul appear to be former MG types (as asserted by Sule Kilicarslan), Firat expressed relief that the number is "only 20" and went on wearily to describe his battles with the MG mentality. Mahmut Kocak, an AKP M.P. from the heartland province of Afyon whose common touch and problem-solving approach are rare in the AKP parliamentary group, railed to us at the retreat mayoral candidates the AKP's Afyon MG mafia had imposed; we followed Kocak on the campaign trail around Afyon province in mid-March, and with one exception, a long-time incumbent with a strong local following, found his complaint on the mark.

14. (C) Beyond the question of how the MG mentality will affect patronage and decision-making, there is another negative aspect to AKP's campaign: its choice of allies and candidates in some areas. Aside from the incomplete vetting of candidates and choice of characterless candidates beholden to the provincial machines or to Erdogan himself (Alibeykoy's Senol and Sar dismiss greater Istanbul candidate Topbas as "Erdogan's caretaker"), AKP has shown itself ready to ally with unsavory partners. A retired imam and an Islamist former confidant of Erdogan in Gaziantep point out that AKP has allied itself in the local race with a network of two dozen Turkish (Kurdish) Hizbullah activists in mosques and has waged an anti-Kurdish, anti-Alevi campaign. We confirmed the party's anti-Kurdish attitude in Gaziantep from AKP women's auxiliary activists' comments to us.

Comment

15. (C) As the embodiment of AKP and Turkey's mayor, Erdogan faces his most decisive challenges after his expected big win.

16. (C) First, although the cult of personality among Turkish party leaders dates from the beginning of the Republic, AKP has identified itself excessively with its leader. And if Erdogan stumbles, the party will deflate. In this regard, Erdogan's arrogance toward ordinary citizens on the campaign trail has drawn a widely-read warning from leading Islamist journalist Ahmet Tasgetiren.

17. (C) Second, AKP will own the majority of Turkey's chronic municipal problems; as the ruling party in Ankara it will have no excuse if it cannot deliver resources to AKP-controlled municipalities. Third, a big win at the municipal level will increase grassroots impatience for solutions to economic and social problems, e.g., legitimization of the Islamic headscarf (turban). Fourth, patronage appointments are markedly more sensitive at the local level, where change of status is immediately felt by the whole community. Packing newly-won municipal administrations with AKP loyalists, especially those with an MG past, will provoke profound disquiet. Kemalist daily

"Cumhuriyet"'s defense correspondent Sertac Es, a son of Anatolia and thus more directly in touch with the heartland than his elitist colleagues, has alerted us that local garrison commanders have already begun to receive streams of angry written complaints on this score from people opposed to AKP; commanders are forwarding bundles of complaints up the chain to the TGS.

18. (C) Moreover, the strains from a big win will highlight question marks over the party (refs E-F). These are (1) Erdogan's character weaknesses, his choice of weak advisors, and the quality of his expected post-election cabinet shuffle; (2) rivals in the party (the widest range of our political, journalist, and religious contacts warn us FonMin Abdullah Gul and his supporters such as deputy party chairman Murat Mercan and foreign policy advisor Ahmet Davutoglu are much more cunning and hostile Islamists -- in a Saudi sense -- than Erdogan); (3) thinness of technocratic skill and inability to manage the resistant State bureaucracy; (4) corruption; (5) the party's attitude toward equal access for women in society and politics; and (6) Erdogan's and AKP's secret-lodge mentality and consequent failure to communicate

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clearly within the party or externally, and indifference to concerns about AKP's intentions on the part of core institutions of the State.
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